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ARTICLE

Maxine Greene: Influences on the Life and Work of a Dynamic Educator

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Passionate leader, visionary, esteemed educator are qualities synonymous with Maxine Greene. Her influence as a dynamic educator leads 21st century educational reform. Greene's prolific writings inspire passion in others. In a 2002 article entitled, "The Power of One," Amy Oringel names Maxine Greene among teaching's most revered thinkers. She is one of the hardest working teachers that this profession has ever spawned. While teaching courses in aesthetic education – the process of building students' cognition by exposure to the arts – to thousands of students, Maxine Greene has impacted the next generation of teaching professionals. She is an active lecturer and seminar speaker. Her animated rhetoric makes a room come alive, all of this from a now frail body of an octogenarian.

Maxine Greene is now considered a feminist. She disliked her privileged upbringing, disliking how it consumed her social-climbing mother. It was her father who inspired her to break free from what she called an *airless life* (Oringel, 2002). While searching for her life, Greene went to graduate school. In an early paper, she wrote about the "Philosopher as Man." In this paper she stated that teachers should behave like people – that is, inject themselves into the teaching process (Oringel, 2002). Being rejected by this early professor, who wanted Greene to remain objective and neutral, it was this course that influenced her to enroll in the doctoral program. Soon, she found herself lecturing to large classrooms as a teaching assistant. She believes that she received a good response not from her knowledge, but from her passion and excitement of the topic.

As a Jewish woman in academia in the 1950s and '60s, Greene was first seen as an intruder. She held philosophical conversations in the ladies' lounge at the faculty club of Teachers College in 1965, since women were not allowed into the faculty club. An opening in an English department opened the door for her becoming a philosopher of education. When she was hired as a professor for philosophy of education at Columbia University, Greene found herself in an intellectual minority: She was an existentialist whose peers subscribed to analytic philosophy. She maintained that individual existence takes precedence over abstract, conceptual essence.

In 1973, with the publication of *Teacher as Stranger: Educational Philosophy for the Modern Age*, Greene encouraged teachers to lead their students on free-form explorations in the classrooms. Thirty years later, in the publication, *Releasing the Imagination*, Greene (1995a or 1995b?) summarizes her message:

To help kids shape their identity, we've got to awaken them to their own questions and encourage them to shape their identity, we've got to awaken them to their own questions and encourage them to create their own projects. They don't really learn unless they ask (p. 22)

As a philosopher and educator, Greene's primary research concerns are philosophies of education and social thought, aesthetics and the teaching of the arts, literature as art, and multiculturalism. Greene's work is prolific, but her texts, *Landscapes of Learning* (1978), *Releasing the Imagination* (1995b), and *Variations on a Blue Guitar* (2001), intertwine aesthetics with the development of imagination and creativity with the role of educational reform. She represents an existentialist approach, as one who believes that humankind exists and defines itself through one's subjectivity while wandering between choice and freedom. Her views reflect the value placed on individualism, self-creation, and self-definition.

For the purpose of this article, it is important to sketch out the influential growth of Maxine Greene, I begin with those philosophers and educators who influenced her. This is not a complete discussion of philosophy, aesthetics, or education, but a brief summary of the philosophers most influential for Maxine Greene with their thoughts and ideas. The summary begins with Jean-Paul Charles Sartre (1905-1980).

Sartre's essay, "Being and Nothingness; A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology" (1943) is regarded as the beginning of existentialism in the 20th century. His writings set the tone for intellectual life in the decade immediately after World War II. Never one to avoid conflict, Sartre (1958) became involved in the Algerian War, generating deep hostility from the Right to the point that French Algerian supporters detonated a bomb outside his apartment building. Sartre's political critique took the form of a series of essays, interviews and plays. His play, *The Condemned of Altona* (1959), combined a sense of exploitation (the colonization) with an expression of moral outrage (racism and oppression of Muslim population) (Flynn, 2004).

This piece, whose chief protagonist is Frantz, 'the butcher of Smolensk', though ostensibly about the effect of Nazi atrocities at the Eastern front on a post war industrialist family in Hamburg, is really addressing the question of collective guilt and the French oppression of the Algerian war for independence raging at the time. (Flynn, 2004, p. 14)

Sartre's writing style often included literary art to convey or even to work through philosophical thoughts that he had already or would later conceptualize in his essays and theoretical studies. This brings out the relationship between imaginative literature and philosophical work, a writing characteristic also found in Maxine Greene's writing style. The strategy of indirect communication has been a tool of existentialism since Kierkegaard adapted the use of pseudonyms in his philosophical writings in the early 19th century (Flynn, 2004).

The point is to communicate a feeling and an attitude that the reader/ spectator adopts in which certain existentialist themes such as anguish, responsibility or bad faith are suggested but not dictated as in a lecture. ... The so-called aesthetic "suspension of disbelief" coupled with the tendency to identify with certain characters and to experience their plight vicariously conveys conviction rather than information. (Flynn, 2004, p. 14-15)

This quotation explains what existentialism is primarily about, a challenge to individuals to examine their lives, to heighten their sensitivity to oppression and exploitation in their world. Sartre's (1943) primary purpose was defining consciousness as transcendent. Greene (1995b) clarifies and applies Sartre's thoughts in "Releasing the Imagination" when she says,

Sartre says everybody experiences a need, that is, a distance between where you are and what you want. In a fair society, we have to enable every child to work through that need in pursuit of his or her own possibility. If you can enable children to choose projects that are meaningful, the product in the final analysis will be superior. (Greene, 1995b, p. 149)

The influence Sartre has on Greene's future beliefs continues with his theory of aesthetics from his work on "Being and Nothingness," possibly an outgrowth from surviving Nazi oppression. For Sartre (1943), art held special powers that interact with the viewer's senses and the artist's concept. The artwork becomes *re-created* through the viewer's perceptions. A social activist, Sartre emphasized the harsh facts of oppression and exploitation not erased by the World War. Society becomes based on violence, and the artist, in his view, has a social responsibility to address the harshness of society. Greene's (1973) growth in her sense of community and cultural influences grew from Husserl (1939), who influenced her belief in the value of humankind. Aesthetics then has a moral responsibility and the artist should raise public awareness.

The relationship between artist and public, Sartre (1943) called *gift-appeal*. Artwork has a special power, that of communicating among freedoms without alienation or objectification. An example of this special power is in *The Psychology of Imagination* (Sartre, 1956). Sartre speaks of a portrait as inviting the viewer to realize its possibilities by regarding it aesthetically. Aesthetics for Sartre is an

active interaction with an art form that expresses an idea. It should cause you to think, to reflect, and to react. Sartre views the imagination as a picture-consciousness. This notion comes from Husserl (1939), whose theory of *picture-consciousness* animates the absent subject. Through this animation, the notion of the internal picture or the image without any material existence functions the same way that the picture does. Sartre identified pure fantasy with picture-consciousness and argued that there are mental pictures at work in fantasy. Fantasy can have the same structural character as the physical picture-consciousness. The mental pictures have physicality. One cannot touch them as a photograph, but may assume that the mental image is a picture and, as such, has a material content. The mental picture is an image, and the theory of the picture-consciousness defines the theory for imagination as a whole. This line of thought develops with Maxine Greene to become a part of her theory of aesthetics.

This attitude suggests an aesthetic appreciation for a work of art. What determines a work of art to be a work of art? How does the picture function? In order for the picture to function as a picture, Sartre (1943) calls for an unrealizing attitude in front of it: The viewer must not see the picture as a real thing belonging to real time and space, but it should be removed from real time and space, taking it out of the context of reality and thus removing it from the world. Greene (1973) regards this as a phenomenon and supports an aesthetic appreciation for the work of art when she says,

To do philosophy, then, is to become highly conscious of the phenomena and events in the world as it presents itself to consciousness. To do philosophy, as Jean-Paul Sartre says, is to develop a fundamental project, to go beyond the situations one confronts and refuse reality as given in the name of a reality to be produced. (Greene, 1973, p. 7)

These examples show that Jean-Paul Sartre influenced Maxine Greene in many ways: to develop an argument using indirect communication shown in the use of literary art to convey ideas later conceptualized and developed in essays of theoretical studies; to see aesthetics and art forms as tools for social activism and with moral responsibility; and in community and cultural influencer.

Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), a companion of Sartre, developed his theory of aesthetics within the continental school of philosophy. He applied the methods of Husserl's phenomenology to the relation of mind and body in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1962) and *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964/1968). He diagnosed a pervasive ambiguity in the character of human life and attributed all consciousness to pre-reflective sensual awareness of the corporeal. He tried to overcome the traditional dichotomy between objective and subjective elements of the human experience. For Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968), as an existentialist, perception becomes the primary mode of access to what is real, but unlike many phenomenologists, he affirms reality as a world that transcends our consciousness. He disagreed with dualism, an idea introduced into western thought by Plato, who claimed that there are actually two worlds, the physical world of appearances and a higher world of intelligible Forms. Merleau-Ponty agreed with Aristotle, who held that mind and body are two aspects of the same thing, the same complete person. From his work in philosophy, he brought the concept of social imagination. Later, Greene adopts this idea and defines it as

the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, in our schools. As I write of social imagination, I am reminded of Jean-Paul Sartre's declaration that "it is on the day that we can conceive of a different state of affairs that a new light falls on our troubles and our suffering and that we decide that these are unbearable." (Sartre, 1943, p. 434-435, as quoted in Greene, 1995b, p. 5)

All mental concepts are socially constructed, and so Merleau-Ponty's (1964/1968) study of perception stresses the social stratum to find meanings and the objective existence of things. He grows this concept into that of an embodied consciousness. Later Greene identifies consciousness as something experienced through time, space, and activity.

Our perception ends in objects, and the object once constituted, appears as the reason for all the experiences of it which we have had ... (Greene, 1973, p. 114)

Perception undergirds cognition: For Merleau-Ponty, the concepts of experience contextualize within the perception of the individual, while at the same time opening the wider world to the individual. This is a dividing point for Sartre (1956) and Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968). Because Merleau-Ponty believes that a fundamental element of a subject's perception is its perspective character, it is always incomplete and leaves the possibilities of other perspectives always open. To clarify, instead of starting with an individual's experience and connecting it to others, as Sartre would, Merleau-Ponty begins with the world and being in the world with others. He argues that the first perceptions are relations to others. The meaning of the human world is

the recognition beyond the present milieu of a world of things visible for each 'I' under a plurality of aspects, the taking of indefinite time and space. (Rasheed, 2002, p. 399)

He grows his thoughts into speech development and cognitive functions. His aesthetics become a thinking process directly related to language. Artists are making a new interpretation of the world, that

does not exist anywhere – not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist himself, in his unformulated life. It summons one away from the already constituted reason in which 'cultured men' are content to shut themselves, toward a reason which contains its own origins. (Greene, 1973, p.115)

When he does this, he creates a successful educational pedagogy that recognizes the role of possibility, while at the same time considering the historical and social contexts of intersubjective relationships, a true cultural studies concept (Rasheed, 2002).

Merleau-Ponty influenced Greene in concepts of an embodied consciousness. Individuals socially construct meaning, and the thinking process has a direct correlation to this social construct. Aesthetics become a direct link with language and, as Greene later interprets, aesthetics are a thinking process directly related to language. Artists interpret the world in new ways using different language forms.

At this point, it is important to discuss Hannah Arendt (1906 - 1975). Hannah Arendt (1958) was one of the leading political thinkers of the 20th century. She studied briefly with Edmund Husserl (1939), who influenced her thinking. With the growing struggles for Jewish people in Nazi Germany, she fled to Paris in 1933. In 1941 she again fled, this time to New York with her husband and mother. New York offered her a voice, and she soon became part of an influential circle of writers and intellectuals who gathered around the journal, *Partisan Review*. During the post-war period, she lectured at a number of American universities, including Princeton, Berkeley and Chicago. She is most closely associated with the New School for Social Research, where she was a professor of political philosophy until her death in 1975.

Arendt (1958) was a stern defender of constitutionalism and the rule of law. By writing *The Human Condition* (1972), Arendt became known as an advocate of fundamental human rights, among which she included not only the right to life, liberty, and freedom of expression, but also the right to action, and opinion. She was a critic of all forms of political community based on traditional ties and customs, as well as those based on religious, ethnic, or racial identity.

Two works of Arendt had a major impact both within and outside the academic community. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951/1973) was a study of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes, which generated a wide-ranging debate on the nature and historical antecedents of totalitarianism. *The Human Condition* (1958/1972) was originally a philosophical study to investigate the fundamental categories of the *vita activa* (labor, work, action). In addition to these two important works, Arendt published a number of influential essays on topics such as the nature of revolution, freedom, authority, tradition and the modern age. At the time of her death in 1975, she had completed the first two volumes of her last major philosophical work, *The Life of the Mind* (1978, published posthumously), which examined the three fundamental faculties of the *vita contemplativa* (thinking, willing, and judging).

It is her theory of action and her revival of the ancient notion of *praxis* that represent her as one of the most original contributors to twentieth century political thought (Dorn, 1994). By distinguishing action (*praxis*) from fabrication (*poiesis*), by linking it to freedom and plurality, and by showing its connection to speech and remembrance, Arendt (1958)

is able to articulate a conception of politics in which questions of meaning and identity are addressed in a fresh and original manner. Moreover, by viewing action as a mode of human togetherness, Arendt is able to develop a conception of participatory democracy, which directly contrasts with the bureaucracy so characteristic of the modern societies.

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality ... this plurality is specifically the condition — not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* — of all political life.” (Arendt, 1958, p. 7)

Her influence on Maxine Greene is evident in her professional *praxis*. Arendt (1958) taught Greene. Hannah Arendt (1958) and Maxine Greene (1988) have similar visions of human freedom and the possibility that there is greater potential in the creation of a more emancipated school community. An emancipated school community refers to the sense of democracy within a school. The following quotation from William Ayers (2001), a former student of Greene's, expands this notion.

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable... Education is where we decide whether we love our children enough to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices ... something unforeseen by us, to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world. (Ayers, 2001, 1977, p. 196)

A synergy exists between their writings, each contributing aspects to the work of the other. Arendt's and Greene's visions of the public are not blueprints for action but rather perspectives from which to rethink our current practices in education. Arendt's idea is that we disclose ourselves when we come together. We relate because we are subjective. We choose a particular kind of identity. This identity relates to specific responsibilities and to valuing what surrounds us.

Freedom for Arendt (1958) does not mean the ability to choose among a set of alternatives (freedom of choice or *liberum arbitrium* which, according to Christian doctrine, is given to us by God). By freedom, Arendt means the capacity to start something new, to do something unexpected. This idea is rooted in natality, a belief that each birth represents a new beginning and the introduction of novelty in the world. All activities are in some way related to the phenomenon of natality, because labor and work are both necessary to create and preserve a world into which new human beings are constantly born. Arendt clarifies this notion in the following quotation:

The new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. (Arendt, 1958, p. 9)

Since actions begin with natality, with our very birth comes a capacity to introduce what is totally unexpected. Arendt continues to clarify natality through the nature of new beginnings:

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings ... The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. (Arendt, 1958, p. 8)

Arendt (1958) discusses revolutions as examples of modern action. Her favorite is the American Revolution, because the foundational act led to the Constitution. Other examples she used were the French Revolution, the creation of the Soviets in the Russian Revolution, the French resistance to Hitler in World War II, and the Hungarian Revolt in 1956: “Revolutions are the only political events, which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning” (Arendt, 1958, p. 21). The individual actions of men and women create a public space where freedom appears

[t]o act in such a way that the memory of their deeds could become a source of inspiration for the future. In doing so, according to Arendt, they rediscovered the truth known to the ancient Greeks that action is the supreme blessing of human life, that which bestows significance to the lives of individuals. (d'Entrevés, 2006, p. 12)

The purpose of this brief synopsis of thoughts and ideas of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Arendt is to envision the richness of

ideas in which Maxine Greene grew and developed. While we are straining toward what ought to be, Maxine Greene began to be a visionary and to imagine. Alfred Schutz (1899 – 1959), another teacher of Greene, agreed with Arendt. Both Arendt and Schutz supported Husserl's ideas of the social world and the social sciences. After serving with an artillery division on the Italian front in World War I, he studied law and social sciences in Vienna with Hans Kelsen and Ludwig von Mises, but it his work in support of Husserl that he is best known. He fled Hitler's Anschluss of Austria in 1939. In America, Schutz developed his thoughts in relationship to American pragmatism, logical empiricism, and various other fields such as music and literature. According to Schutz (1967), social scientists develop constructs, ideal types, meaning-contexts of lived experience. Schutz responds to the positivist view that social sciences should make use of natural scientific methods, identifying evidence with sensory data that are observable.

By the term "wide-awakeness" we want to denote a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements. Only the performance and especially the working self is fully interested in life and, hence, wide-awake. It lives within its acts and its attention is exclusively directed to carrying its project into effect, to executing its plan. This attention is an active, not a passive one. Passive attention is the opposite of full awareness. (Schutz, 1967, p. 213)

Greene (1978) states that the concept of "wide-awakeness" goes beyond ordinary notions of relevance for education; Schutz (1967) points out that a heightened consciousness and reflectiveness are meaningful with respect for human projects and undertakings, not in a withdrawal from the intersubjective world:

That wide-awakeness contributes to the creation of the self, if it is indeed the case, as I believe it is, that involvement with the arts and humanities has the potential for provoking precisely this sort of reflectiveness, we need to devise ways of integrating them into what we teach at all levels of the educational enterprise... (Greene, 1978, p. 163)

Added to these rich European thoughts comes the American voice and influence of John Dewey (1958) on Maxine Greene. John Dewey (1859 – 1952) is commonly known as the founder of the progressive education movement (Garrison, 1999). His establishment of the University Laboratory School in 1896 gave him a practical venue for active research in education. Several women influenced his development, including his wife, who awakened his ingrained sense of social justice and encouraged his public works. A colleague at the University of Chicago, Ella Flagg Young, practically applied and experimented at the Laboratory School. It is interesting to note that Young was the first woman president of the National Education Association and became superintendent of the Schools of Chicago. The Laboratory School operated alongside Jane Addams and her work at Hull House, for which she received the Nobel Prize. Dewey sought to constantly re-evaluate his thinking and ideas and thought that all people should reconstruct their own thinking several times in the course of their lives (Garrison, 1999, p. 4). Dewey's theory of education is quite compact. In *Democracy and Education*, he summarizes education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions both intellectually and emotionally. It is important to realize Dewey's mindset, that he did not separate thinking and feeling from action.

As Garrison summarizes,

Dewey is clear that method is not separable from subject matter... 'Method means that arrangement of subject matter, which makes it most effective in use. Never is method something outside of the material'... The subject matter of the learner is not identical with the formulated, the crystallized and systematized subject matter of the adult...the teacher should be occupied not with subject matter in itself but with its interaction with the pupils' present needs and capacities...Subject matter alone does not make a good teacher. (Garrison, 1999, p. 10)

Dewey and Greene have similar beliefs about the role of a teacher. There should be a connection of the subject matter to the desires and needs of the students. The students' needs range across different areas, such as the physical and social, and even within a political context. Good teaching should consider the moral responsibility toward society with the cognitive perceptions of the needs and abilities of the students.

Dewey, like Greene, sought to break down barriers between art and the rest of the educational experience by tracing the continuities between works of art and the human experiences. Significance is in the ongoing growth process, learning from experience, or learning by doing. This is Dewey's (1954) idea of a transformative, aesthetic experience, and Maxine Greene has said that John Dewey considered imagination important. In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey (1954) wrote:

The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Artists have always been the real purveyors of the news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation. (p. 86)

People need the freedom to imagine and reflect, which ultimately leads to praxis. Dewey (1954) sought ways to reach and challenge people to anticipate aesthetic experience, often using metaphor, and Maxine Greene builds on his work. Dewey (1934) saw imagination as a gateway from which meanings are derived from past experiences, which add to our understanding of the present.

Through these aesthetic adventures and opened windows of opportunity, habits of mind form that build community. These new ways of thinking about, seeing, and acting lead to experiencing fuller perceptions. Both Greene and Dewey use the strategy of metaphor in their writings to aid our creative thinking. For both, metaphors grow new ways of thinking about, seeing, or acting on ideas that trigger our aesthetic growth. Both Dewey's and Greene's students engage in experimental experiences with ideas.

As a philosopher, Maxine Greene spends much of her time looking at the world. Philosophy is a key ingredient in building a world, but another aspect is through education, its process and product. Education does not occur in a vacuum, and it is with this introduction that Greene (1978) asks difficult questions to help us expand our thinking about culture, natural flowering of intellect, social change, and heritage. She spends much of her time discussing the ramifications of teaching, giving us a picture of a teacher as someone who reacts "in a variety of ways." There are daily routines, many ways of adjusting, but my favorite statements come when she quotes Kozol on the classroom,

The classroom is the child's home for many hours each day. It is also his place of work. Therefore, the classroom should reflect happiness, the protection, the loving guidance of the how, as well as, the efficiency of the workshop... (Greene, 1978, p. 5)

This pictures the classroom as full of possibilities, with each student rich in potential, and each teacher a reflective practitioner. This emphasis on "what should be" is a strong point of her existentialist argument. She moves to reduce philosophy in education to its essences. To summarize, it is,

in openings, in unexplored possibilities, not in the predictable or quantifiable, not in what is thought of as social control. For us, education signifies an initiation into new ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, moving. It signifies the nurture of a special kind of reflectiveness and expressiveness, a reaching out for meanings, a learning to learn. (Greene, 2001, p. 7)

Then she moves to bring the two ideas together, education with philosophy:

To do educational philosophy is to become critically conscious of what is involved in the complex business of teaching and learning...to clarify the meanings. (Greene, 2001, p. 7)

Greene seeks to constitute our consciousness so that as educators, we realize ourselves as philosophers. She seeks to liberate our consciousness to a state of reflective action.

Maxine Greene has been at the forefront of educational philosophy for more than fifty years based on her prolific writings, the esteem in which she is held, the passion she shows, and the passion she inspires in others. As the founder and director of the *Center for Social Imagination, the Arts and Education* at Teachers College, Columbia University, she has sought to engage in public discussions on educational reform and the importance of aesthetics education. Her growth as a philosopher was influenced by many, but for the purpose of this discussion only a few were discussed. From Sartre (1958), Maxine Greene developed her sense of community and cultural influences. All humankind has value, and it is the moral responsibility of aesthetics to raise public awareness. Art has a special power to communicate. From Merleau-Ponty (1978), Maxine Greene developed her vision of social imagination, a vision of what *ought to be*. From Arendt (1958), Greene adopts the notion of *praxis*, to act. Alfred Schutz (1967) brought to Greene the notion of *wide-awakeness*, a plane of consciousness

of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements. John Dewey (1954) influenced Greene for social democracy and for the freedom to imagine. Dewey wrote about artwork having special power to communicate among freedoms without alienation or objectification. As each of these philosophers and educators influenced Maxine Greene, she in turn now influences others. Greene's legacy consists of doing philosophy as a part of the *praxis* of teaching. In this light teaching is the vocation of vocations, because to choose teaching is to be about the business of empowerment, the business of enabling others to choose well.

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